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Mexico: Geographic Perspectives on the Strategic Southeast

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A Research Paper

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A Research Paper

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Mexico: Geographic Perspectives on the Strategic Southwest

Southeastern Mexico, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the borders with Guatemala and Belize, is an area of abundant natural resources and growing security concerns. Its proximity to the volatile Central American region has led to some speculation that leftist insurgency might spill over into Mexico and endanger the country's vital petroleum facilities. The presence of large numbers of Guatemalan refugees in the border zone and Guatemalan Army incursions into Mexico in search of insurgents have generated new tensions between neighboring nations that have long viewed each other with suspicion. This paper briefly examines the refugee situation, describes the region's resources, and assesses the influence of physical and cultural characteristics of the area that make it suitable for guerrilla operations. It does not attempt to assess the probability of insurgency or to gauge the degree of social unrest in southeastern Mexico; no Mexican guerrillas are known to be active in the area, and no Guatemalan guerrillas have threatened Mexican installations.

Problems Along the Southern Border

Mexico and Guatemala have a history of strained relations over territorial problems. Although their mutual boundary is not in dispute, Guatemalan guerrilla use of Mexican territory, the influx of Guatemalan refugees, and border intrusions by Guatemalan security forces have the potential for further aggravating relations between the two countries.

Guatemalan Incursions in Mexico. Guatemalan insurgents use Mexican territory to infiltrate men and supplies into Guatemala, to provide medical care for their wounded, and to flee from Guatemalan security forces.

Each of the three largest Guatemalan insurgent groups maintains a supply infrastructure traversing southern Mexico. Supply routes cross at places along almost the entire border, and everything from tractor trailers to canoes and mules are used. US Embassy reports indicate that Guatemalan insurgents have received assistance from local leftists.

The Refugee Influx. Thousands of Guatemalans have fled to Mexico to escape violence in their homeland. Beginning in late 1980, successive waves of peasants have moved across the border. The Government of Mexico and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimate that they are assisting about 41,000 Guatemalan refugees in eastern Chiapas. Scores of camps are strung along the Guatemala border; the largest shelters more than 4,000 people, but most are much smaller. US officials ascertained through the largest camps report that almost all of the refugees are Indians; many are probably sympathetic to the Guatemalan insurgency. Insurgents use some of the camps for support.

Regional Security. During the past several years, Guatemalan military forces are known to have crossed the border into southern Mexico in search of Guatemalan insurgents. US Embassy officials

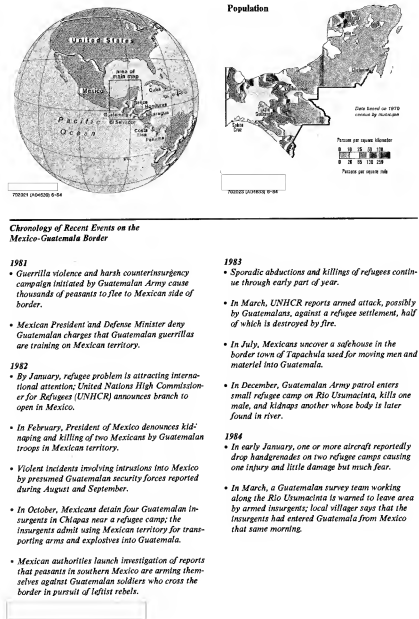
In addition to these unauthorized intrusions, illicit cross-border operations, including drug smuggling and gun running, are common along Mexico's borders with Guatemala and Belize. Since 1982 Mexican military and security forces in the frontier region have been strengthened. An additional infantry battalion has been moved to Chiapas, and a new military zone has been established along the Guatemala border. More naval vessels patrol the southern shores, and exercises have been conducted near offshore oil facilities in the Bahía de Campeche. On the Pacific coast, the small marine detachment stationed at Puerto Madero to guard the zone near the border has been reinforced. Mexican immigration and army posts along the border have been integrated, and additional immigration officials have been assigned to the region. Mexican Army units have been ordered to report on any intruding Guatemalan force but to avoid confrontations.

Resources of the Region

The Southwest is underdeveloped compared with other parts of the country, but it contains enormous assets that are vital to the Mexican economy and strategically important to the United States. Of principal interest are the region's abundant petroleum resources, among the richest in the world. Also significant is the vast hydroelectric potential of the area. Facilities associated with these energy sources could become prime targets should insurgency flare up in southern Mexico.

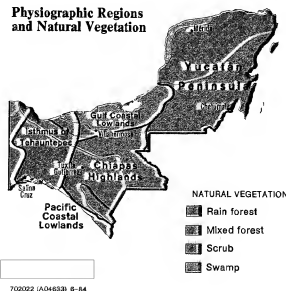
Petroleum Facilities. Within the past decade, major oilfields have been discovered and exploited in the Bahía de Campeche and the adjacent littorals of Campeche, Tabasco, and northern Chiapas. This southern oil zone now accounts for more than 90 percent of Mexico's total crude oil and natural gas production. The availability of salt, sulfur, and petroleum have made the Gulf coastal area a principal focus of the petroleum industry. PEMEX (Petróleos Mexicanos), the national petroleum enterprise, has located its south zone headquarters at Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco. Major refineries are located at Minatitlán on the Gulf coast and at Salina Cruz on the Pacific. Other major petrochemical sites are Coahuila, Ciudad Pemex, and La Veta. Natural gas plants are in operation at Coahuila and La Canchigua. Huge quantities of oil are shipped out of the port of Coahuila. Increasing amounts are also shipped from an offshore facility at Cayos de Arcos and from Dos Bocas, a new port still under construction but already in partial operation. On the Pacific coast, oil is shipped from Salina Cruz which receives its crude

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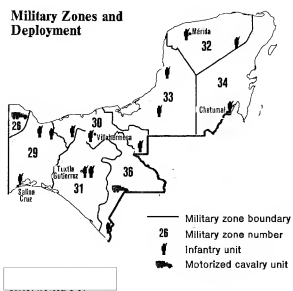


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Physiographic Regions and Natural Vegetation



Military Zones and Deployment



oil via pipeline across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This lowland depression is often taken as the physical boundary between North America and Central America. Maximum elevations are only 250 meters, and the land mass narrows to 200 kilometers between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Thus, the Isthmus forms a convenient coast-to-coast transshipment route. Freight is carried via railway and road between Coatzacoalcas in the north and Salina Cruz in the south. Highways also parallel the coasts, but, except for the transisthmian route, the road network of the interior is sparse. Much of the Isthmus is covered with tropical forest that would provide excellent concealment for guerrilla operations aimed at disrupting transisthmian transportation. Most of the population is clustered around Coatzacoalcas and Minatitlan in the north and around Juchitan, Tehuantepec, and Salina Cruz in the south. A large percentage of the people, especially in the south, are Indian. Press reports indicate that a locally strong leftist coalition has attempted to exploit grievances against the Mexican Government.

Hydroelectric Facilities. The region's principal rivers, the Rio Grijalva and the Rio Usumacinta, provide Mexico with its greatest hydroelectric potential. The country's three largest hydroelectric plants are already in operation in Chiapas on the Rio Grijalva: Angostura (0.9 million kilowatts), Chicoasen (1.5 million kilowatts), and Netzahualcoyotl (0.7 million kilowatts). A joint Guatemalan-Mexican commission for several years has studied the feasibility of a dam on the Rio Usumacinta, but construction is likely to be delayed by financial constraints and border tensions. Power lines and other components of the electrical network are vulnerable to sabotage, and costly power outages could occur.

Geographic Setting and Military Operating Conditions The physical environment and demographic characteristics of southeast Mexico strongly influence its military security. Although far larger than any of the Central American countries, the region has only 5 million inhabitants—about the same as tiny El Salvador, one-tenth its size. The population is unevenly distributed and, where vast areas are sparsely settled, illicit activities could go undetected. Physiographically, the region can be divided into the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the Gulf Coastal Lowlands, the Yucatan Peninsula, the Chiapas Highlands, and the Pacific Coastal Lowlands.

Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This lowland depression is often taken as the physical boundary between North America and Central America. Maximum elevations are only 250 meters, and the land mass narrows to 200 kilometers between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Thus, the Isthmus forms a convenient coast-to-coast transshipment route. Freight is carried via railway and road between Coatzacoalcas in the north and Salina Cruz in the south. Highways also parallel the coasts, but, except for the transisthmian route, the road network of the interior is sparse. Much of the Isthmus is covered with tropical forest that would provide excellent concealment for guerrilla operations aimed at disrupting transisthmian transportation. Most of the population is clustered around Coatzacoalcas and Minatitlan in the north and around Juchitan, Tehuantepec, and Salina Cruz in the south. A large percentage of the people, especially in the south, are Indian. Press reports indicate that a locally strong leftist coalition has attempted to exploit grievances against the Mexican Government.

Guatemalan guerrillas engage in smuggling activities along the southern coast—an area of swamp-fringed lagoons that is difficult to patrol.

Gulf Coastal Lowlands. Facing the gulf east of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec lies a broad plain comprising all of Tabasco and the lowland portion of northern Chiapas. Beaches backed by lagoons and marsh form its seaward margin. The lower courses of rivers meandering across the plain are flanked by forested natural levees; beyond the levees stretch swamps and marshy areas that make cross-country movement practically impossible. Firmer ground lies farther inland. On the better drained areas, much of the natural forest has been replaced by plantations of bananas and sugarcane or is used for cattle pastures. Traditional pursuits such as farming and fishing

continue to occupy the majority of the inhabitants, but the oil boom of recent years has brought thousands of professionals and technicians to the urban centers. Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco, now has more than 180,000 residents. The main east-west highway from Mexico City to the Yucatan Peninsula passes through Villahermosa. Traffic on this and other roads is often delayed by long lines of trucks at oil facilities. East of Villahermosa the highway is subject to flooding, and along the coast irregular ferry service may also cause delays. A more reliable route eastward follows a course farther inland. The main pipeline carrying crude oil from the region passes just to the south of Villahermosa.

Yucatan Peninsula. This broad limestone platform juts northward into the Gulf of Mexico. Covered with thorny scrub in the north and rain forest in the south, it is a forbidding region. Most of the inhabitants are Maya Indians, who are concentrated in the north, especially in and around Yucatan's capital, Merida (344,000 inhabitants). Henequen plantations, now in decline, and subsistence farming on shallow soils provide employment for most of the people in the countryside. The tourist industry, capitalizing on spectacular Maya ruins, such as those at Chichen Itza, and on beach resorts, such as Cancun, is also important to the local economy. The southern two-thirds of the peninsula, including most of Quintana Roo, is covered by rain forest and supports only a sparse population. It is extremely difficult to patrol and ideally suited for cross-border movement, smuggling, and guerrilla operations.

Chiapas Highlands. The Sierra Madre de Chiapas, with peaks reaching elevations of more than 3,000 meters, forms a steep escarpment overlooking the Pacific coast. Few roads and no paved highways cross this barrier to link the coast and the interior. The backslope of the range descends more gradually and is drained by tributaries of the Rio Grijalva. The northern part of the highlands, composed mainly of limestone, includes hills, steep-sided plateaus, and rolling surfaces pitted with sinkholes. The population is widely dispersed. Most of the Indians (about half the total) are scattered through the higher, colder, remoter sections where they tend subsistence plots; the mestizos are concentrated in the larger towns and cities at lower elevations. Tuxtla Gutierrez (population about 200,000) is the state capital, principal city, and transportation hub. Downstream on the Rio Grijalva is the reservoir of the Netzahualcoyotl hydroelectric facility, and upstream is the Angostura. The Inter-American Highway passes through Tuxtla Gutierrez on its way to the Guatemalan border. Significant towns on the highway east of the city include San Cristobal de las Casas and Comitán, the latter a strategic military post, headquarters of a motorized cavalry regiment.

Although many slopes in the highlands have been denuded by slash-and-burn agriculture, sufficient vegetation is available throughout most of the area to provide concealment for clandestine activities. The Inter-American Highway and the nearby Rio Selagua, which also crosses the border, are reportedly used as smuggling routes by Guatemalan insurgents. Other routes farther to the east, especially to the south of the Rio Lacantun, are also used for smuggling; PEMEX has reportedly suspended oil exploration in easternmost Chiapas because of guerrilla activities.

Pacific Coastal Lowlands. This region, consisting of a narrow coastal plain between the slopes of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas and the Pacific Ocean, forms a principal transportation corridor leading to Guatemala. A railroad and two paved highways link the two countries in this area. Fertile soils support extensive cotton plantations on the lowland plains and coffee and sugarcane on the better drained slopes of the adjacent foothills. A number of towns are strung along the main coastal highway, but the only sizable place is Tapachula (population about 100,000) near the Guatemalan border. Tapachula is a transit point for thousands of seasonal migrants from Guatemala who enter Mexico to harvest cotton, coffee, and cocoa. The town is also notorious as a smuggling center. Puerto Madero, a small fishing port linked by a railroad to Tapachula, is one of the few populated places directly on the coast; it, too, probably thrives on smuggling. Most of the coast is fringed by shallow lagoons and mangrove swamps through which small craft can move with little risk of detection.



Palenque is one of the more famous of the hundreds of Mayan archaeological ruins scattered throughout southeastern Mexico.

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Dense vegetation makes much of the Mexico-Guatemala border zone suitable for guerrilla operations

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The output of southeastern Mexico are among the richest and most productive in the world

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The vastest of the Guatemalan refugee camps in Mexico is near the Guatemalan border



Children make up about half the population of the Guatemalan refugee camps.

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